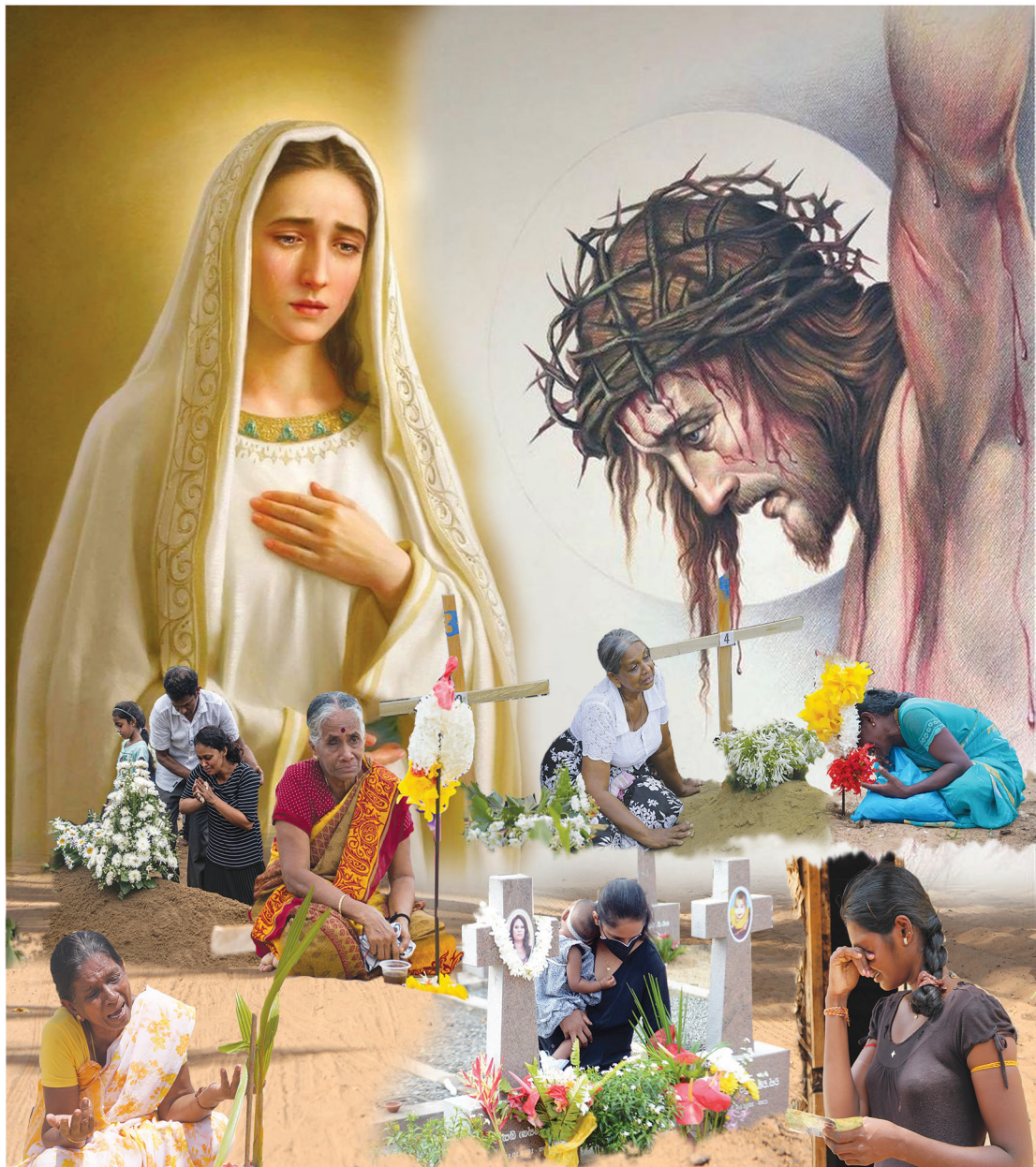


Lent with the Oppressed - Seeking Justice



Lenten Spiritual Programme 2024

Catholic National Commission for Justice, Peace and Human Development
Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC



Cover Story

All Christians find significance in the suffering of Jesus Christ throughout the Lenten season. Jesus lived a brief life on this earth showing people the real meaning of life by his way of life. He consistently stood up for the underprivileged and oppressed. He endured suffering to establish justice and peace on this earth. He never suffered in vain but for a worthy cause.

Seeking justice for the victims of the Easter Sunday attack in 2019 that claimed the lives of over 273 innocent people should be continued until we find justice. Also we need to be sensitive towards the victims by showing them our solidarity. All victims of the Easter Sunday attack have sacrificed their lives as a result of the undemocratic governance of the country that has disregarded the dignity of human lives. Yet, they have failed to accept the crime committed. Hence, it is our moral right to support the families of the victims who seek justice. At the same time, the Tamil Community who suffered due to the prolonged 30 years of war are still seeking the truth and justice. Let us remember all those who died and disappeared during the time of war in Sri Lanka.

Let us ask our Blessed Mother who had to stand in front of the cross while her only Son was killed by the high priests, that she may lead us in the path of justice.

Sr. Deepa Fernando

Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC

Lenten Spiritual Programme 2024

Lent with the Oppressed - Seeking Justice

A guide for 40 days' Lenten Reflections

A Publication of Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC

Approved by Catholic Bishops' Conference in Sri Lanka

PREAMBLE

We know that St. Francis of Assisi preferred to cover his nakedness with a cross-shaped garb of brown colour after stripping himself and throwing away the official attire bought from the money of his aristocratic father. After stripping himself of the so-called official attire, what he proclaimed in 'nudity' is the Good News of emptiness, the Good News of poverty and the Good News of giving up things.

The reason as to why he opted for a cross-shaped garb of brown colour was to constantly remind himself of a deeper spiritual commitment and reality: the brown outfit is evocative of the fact that every man is dust, and to dust he shall return whereas the garb of the cross-shape reminds us that one is a pilgrim on earth who sojourns denying himself, taking up his cross and focusing on heaven.

Therefore, what we begin is a 40-day pilgrimage. Every Lent invites us to experience a true conversion of heart and a change of life being conscious deep within our hearts of the 40 days required for God during the time of Noah to cleanse the earth from the stain of sin after the great flood, of the 40 years on foot required for Moses to lead the Israelites from the bondage of sin and slavery to the liberty of the promised land crossing the Red Sea and eating Manna of the desert and finally the struggle of Jesus with the devil in the desert for 40 days.

Right through the history of the Bible, God had revealed his marvellous plan in and through various appalling calamities. It is also wonderful to observe as to how the Lord born of tears brought into fruition the salvific plan through the broken and shattered hearts. God continues to reveal Himself even today by means of such appalling events: 30 years of 'curse' marked by North-East war and the heinous Easter massacre carried out 5 years ago, would invite us to have a foretaste of salvation in search of the real depth of our faith, in search of the real joy of the cross and in search of the real immortality of life.

The 40-day retreat that we begin with the application of the ashes on our foreheads compels us to ponder and meditate deeply on the crosses attached to our lives, 'Cross' is our life, 'Cross' is our spirituality and 'Cross' is our identity. 'Cross' is our rhythm and way of life, 'Cross' is our religion and 'Cross' is we, ourselves.

As affirmed by Saint John Mary Vianney, we ourselves are made in the shape of the cross. It was on account of this scandalous cross being transformed by Jesus to be the altar of his death, that the meaning attached to it assumed a different significance and connotation: a gallows of death becoming a tree of life, the curse of Calvary becoming a source of blessing and the symbol of death becoming the door of life.

Therefore, let us 'pass over': from death to life, from darkness to light, from slavery to an emancipated existence.

Rev. Fr. Prasad Harshana

Archdiocese of Colombo



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**Message from
Most Rev. Dr. Harold Anthony Perera
Chairman,
Catholic Bishops' Conference in Sri Lanka**

A Lent with those persecuted for righteousness.

(Let us invite one another for a 'National Prayer' throughout the season of Lent)

This is the time of God's favour. This is the day of salvation. We have stepped into another Season of Lent, as usual of the year 2024. The recurring words that resound during this season are the words of prophet Joel: "Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn to the Lord." We are invited during this time of grace to receive his favour and salvation by partaking in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus the Lord.

We should be resolutely determined to experience and embrace a real 'passing over' in the Easter mystery that we celebrate to commemorate. In this regard, let us pay our attention to the following phenomena closely knit to our memory and history. We are completing the 5th year since the gruesome Easter massacre of the innocent. Let us continue to clamour for justice for those victimized, maimed and incapacitated because of the wickedness of the powerful coupled with sheer irresponsibility.

Further, it is doubtful whether justice has been meted out to date for those of our brothers and sisters in North and East who had been battered and displaced by the unforgettable 30-year- civil war in our own country. We continue to hear the incessant laments and mourning of those mothers in the North who are still waiting in desperate hope and expectation, for the return of their missing sons and daughters. It is also highly regrettable and startlingly pathetic to think of the

delayed legal procedures for those who have been mysteriously killed or intentionally displaced within our own country.

In the face of struggles of life battered by the economic crisis, injustices, corruptions, crimes and struggles, let us hopefully await for the powerful intervention of God in whom we trust and believe and the justice be achieved.

Let us daily pray and beseech God during this Season of Lent for these intentions deep buried within our hearts.

Yours in Christ,

Rt. Rev. Dr. Harold Anthony Perera

The Bishop of Kurunegala and the President
of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL)

**Message from
Most Rev. Dr. Justin Gnanapragasam
Chairman,
Catholic National Commission for Justice, Peace and
Human Development**

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

As we begin the spiritual journey of the Lenten Season in the year 2024, let our prayers be directed to seeking repentance and a transformation of hearts among the faithful. May these 40 days of spiritual journey bring meaningful experiences to all the faithful. During Lent, Christians engage in practices such as fasting, prayer and almsgiving as a way of coming closer to God while reflecting on the life and teachings of our Lord.

“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:38).

Our Lenten theme for 2024 is: Lent with the Oppressed - Seeking Justice. Presently there are many justice issues unheard by the authority. It is known that our Tamil community in the North and East are still in pursuit of truth and justice for their beloved. The wounds of war are under the carpet and in the process of healing and reconciliation, these communities are finding the truth.

Martin Luther King, Junior once wrote in his 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail that “freedom is never given voluntarily by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” One can enjoy

the total freedom once their rights are fulfilled. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka quests for justice for the victims of the Easter terror attack in 2019 which still remains a mystery. We aspire to illuminate the truth throughout the entire nation. Therefore, in this sacred season of Lent, let us engage in fervent prayers, entreating that the oppressed find liberation through the revelation of the truths surrounding the Easter Sunday Terror Attack and the sufferings endured by the War Victims in Sri Lanka.

In this Lent season, I suggest joining spiritual activities with strong faith, improving your prayer life, and being open to God's great love for you. Listen for His voice and follow where it leads. The ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday remind us that we are mortal and need to repent. As we carry this cross, let's follow Jesus' example of facing challenges, overcoming temptations, and staying committed to God's will.

I hope this Lent brings you grace, renewal, and a stronger sense of God's endless love. As we get ready for the happy Easter celebration, may Christ's peace be with you and lead you during this special time.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Justin Gnanapragasam

Chairman

Catholic National Commission for Justice, Peace and Human Development

**Message from
Rev. Fr. Luke Nelson Perera
National Director
Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC**

Caritas Sri Lanka, the Catholic National Commission for Justice, Peace, and Human Development (SEDEC), has compiled this spiritual booklet for Sunday reflections during Lent. The theme “Lent with the Oppressed – Seeking Justice,” shows how it is important to care about and understand the difficulties of marginalized communities, and work actively to make things fair.

The term “seeking” is commonly linked with many Bible verses that talk about looking for God, wisdom, doing what’s right, or finding the truth. In the Bible, when we talk about seeking, it usually means actively and sincerely searching for something. For instance, the scripture says, “Ask, and you’ll get it; look for it, and you’ll find it; knock, and the door will open. If you ask, you’ll get; if you seek, you’ll find; and if you knock, the door will open.” (Luke 11:09-10). People might not always know the truth, but God always does and everything is clear to Him. Therefore, God invites us to go towards Him for help, and seek Him for an answer.

The Catholic Church’s teachings about justice come from her social doctrine. This doctrine includes principles that help Catholics understand social justice and truth. The Church highlights how social justice is crucial and is seen as a key part of living according to the Gospel. Talking about war widows in Sri Lanka and the victims of the Easter Bomb attack, it means being committed to understanding their difficulties and standing up for fairness on their behalf. During Lent 2024, we want to invite Catholics in the country to pray strongly for truth and

justice for oppressed communities. This can bring them healing and kindness.

As part of Caritas Sri Lanka – SEDEC, I'm happy about the teamwork we have put into seeking justice. The thoughts in this spiritual booklet help us get ready for Lent. As we begin this spiritual journey, let us support the oppressed so that justice can win over injustice. Together, we can keep making a positive impact.

A big thank you to all the Priests who shared Sunday reflections for this booklet. May our journey for justice be a source of hope for everyone.

Rev. Fr. Luke Nelson Perera

National Director

Caritas Sri Lanka - SEDEC

Ash Wednesday

14th February 2024

- **First Reading:** **Joel 2:12-18**
- **Second Reading:** **2 Corinthians 5:20- 6:2**
- **Gospel:** **Mathew 6:1-6, 16-18**

“Dust” in the Bible, is the element used to form and create the human body. Once Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes.” It is evident that the criterion that Abraham used in the presence of Creator - God to express the breadth and length of man’s fragility, limitedness and weakness is ‘dust and ashes. The creator used the same ‘dust’ as a strong symbol, to show and reveal the transient and passing nature of human being as that of the rest of His creation: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). The gestures like laying and sitting on the dust of the ground, throwing dust on the heads of the people and bowing the heads to the dust of the ground symbolize in the Bible a deep contempt, repugnance and lamentation.

As recorded in the Bible, the man formed out of dust from the ground becomes a living creature because of the breath of life that God breathed into his nostrils. (Genesis 2:7). That is how man owned and inherited the image and likenesses of God. Though human body is temporary, the divine breath of live or the soul found therein, is eternal. As the result of rejecting the Creator-God who gave man the eternal breath of life, the sin had set in to the world. Man, thus distorted and lost the divine image and likeness that he inherited burdening and taking upon himself ‘death’ capable of reducing his life back to dust. Therefore, Jesus, the only begotten son of God had to suffer pain and embraced death so that he could restore the very eternity that man had lost because of sin. Thanks to the merits that man received of Jesus’ sacrificial death, he re-inherited the eternal life.

The Season of Lent beginning with Ash Wednesday reminds us over and over that human body and the worldly life that it entails is something temporary and valueless as that of “dust.” It further reminds us of our calling to aim and work for the resurrection ‘passing over’ the death that we inherited as the result of rejecting the Creator-God who gave us the breath of life. It can be achieved not so much by being simply repentant for the sins that we commit but being determined to embrace a total conversion of life, a metanoia. The ashes that is applied on our foreheads today reminds us of this reality.

We too know that the motive behind the masterminds, planners and the executors of the Easter bomb, 5 years ago that reduced to ashes and dust, the lives of 273 innocents who gathered to celebrate the greatest feast of receiving the eternal life on Easter Sunday, was due to the greed for temporary political power. The reason why we believe that one day the ‘truth’ of this heinous Easter crime will be surfaced and brought to light, irrespective of all the temporary attempts being made to put under the carpet with the use of their power and money is because of the firm trust that we have in our redeemer who is “the Truth” par excellence.

Rev. Fr. Cyril Gamini Fernando
Archdiocese of Colombo



First Sunday of Lent

18th February 2024

- **First Reading:** **Genesis 9:8-15**
- **Second Reading:** **1 Peter 3:18-22**
- **Gospel:** **Mark 1:12-15**

Alas! When should we laugh in such a world under a heaven....?

INTRODUCTION

‘Easter’ means ‘passing over’, a passage of an accompaniment of the Israelites by God the almighty from the bond of slavery to oasis of liberation. What they commemorated in Passover, year after year was this event Exodus and in this commemorative celebration, they renewed and relived with all its ‘vividness’ that original exodus experience of their forefathers.

However, with the passage of time, they began to re-own the very same servitude in which they were originally found. In fact, the whole humanity was being drawn to embrace this rhythm of life characterized by sinful servitude. The will of the Almighty, on the contrary was quite otherwise: the ushering of a renewed life in a new world under a new heaven. Alas! When should we laugh in such a world under such a heaven....?

As a generation of Christians, we have rejected the beautiful experience of that new word becoming people were dragged to sin and drawn to slavery. Therefore, it is imperative that we initiate a ‘Way and a Journey of the Cross’ of our own lives in the hope of realizing that new world under new heaven.

REFLECTION

Jesus comes to the desert to initiate that Way and the Journey of the Cross, to gather the strength necessary for the journey ahead. (Mk. 1:12). It is worth recalling that even the Israelites, after being liberated from the bond of slavery, marched towards the new promised land

through the desert. Jesus might have remembered that journey. He might have felt as to how the same people have been enmeshed in the same slavery failing to recognize their own servitude. There was atmosphere being created around them which, in fact deprived them of such a recognition. However, Jesus could recognize well in advance, this tempting possibility of slavery in the desert. He struggled, grappled and wrestled with it commanding and securing a victory over it.

Do we recognize our own slavery? Are we aware that we have been made slavish by so-called 'values' insidiously presented by the society? Are we not aware that we have been driven astray by so-called trends and currents of the society? Am I a daughter or a son leading a life pleasing to God? Or a person who is inclined to chase after insatiable desires? Have I destroyed my soul because of drunkenness, fashion, money, higher education and the like? Am I a person who has allowed my God-given dignity to be destroyed because of party politics, bribes, underhand dealings, licentiousness and fornication? Am I a person who accepts God as my only Lord? Am I a person Who is committed and ready to be thoughtful of others and uplift my village and country? Or else, am I such an egoistic person who is worried and interested only in the things and the affair that concern my own survival? "Is it the desirous wish of the Christians to live on Christ who tore open his selfishness and was full of humanity and to lay our lives for the sake of the kingdom found within him?" (Cited: Lande Handa "Paaskuwa" Publication.

RESOLUTION

"The essence of Christian faith is to allow God's infinite love to be operative within oneself following His vocation and abandoning one's egoism." (Christmas Message by His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith)

Rev. Fr. William Evans
Archdiocese of Colombo



Second Sunday of Lent

25th February 2024

- **First Reading:** **Genesis 22:1-2, 9a 10-13, 15-18**
- **Second Reading:** **Romans 8:31-34**
- **Gospel:** **Mark 9:2-10**

Today's Gospel reminds of the Transfiguration of our Lord. In all the three Synoptic Gospels, the incident of Transfiguration is recorded. Why does the mother church invite us to reflect upon this incident in the very beginning of Lent? What is the Lenten message embedded in the Transfiguration of our Lord? Transfiguration reveals the glorious victory of our Lord after His death on the cross. The Lent prepares us to repentance, prayer and fasting. In that way we might feel that the reflection upon the Transfiguration of today as a wrong thing at the wrong place. But the mother Church teaches us something completely contrary to it. That is, the end result of all our penance and charitable activities is joy and happiness. At the end of the suffering and the death on the cross is the victory which is a must.

Transfiguration is a pre-revelation of His victorious resurrection. In this way, the Church shows us the meaning of our suffering specially during the Lent, and normally every day. The suffering is not a fruitless and worthless thing in our life but a way to a successful victory. That's why in a Sinhala poem, it is written that "there is a big meaning for my suffering since the triumphant victory is sure at the end of it".

To understand better the Transfiguration, it is also very important to know what is recorded in the gospel as the last things happened in the life of Jesus before the Transfiguration. One immediate important thing is St. Peter's proclamation that Jesus is the Christ, and the Son of Living God. After this proclamation, Jesus revealed to His disciples of His death and resurrection. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again". This was not understood by the disciples that day. By hearing this they not only were disturbed but also accused Jesus for saying this. In this collection of last incidents, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things".

Actually, what was the response of the Peter, John and Jacob who climbed on to the top of Tabor with the Lord when they saw His face shining like the sun and clothes were dazzling white. First the fear, then the words. “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”. This response describes our normal behavior. We as human beings love to stay where we are welcomed, where there is no challenge or disturbance. Those are our comfort zones. We try not to enjoy the goodness of them, we try to grab them and stick onto them forever without leaving. That’s why even the disciple say that they want to erect three dwellings. The Lent invites us to give up our cravings, attachments, things and persons as they avoid us in our Christian way of living from the Christian path.

What is our Christian path? God, the Father Himself remind us of this at the moment of Transfiguration: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to Him”. What is the last words Jesus uttered just before the Transfiguration? “If anyone want to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” Jesus said. In this way Jesus invites us not to attach to this world and to stick onto it, not to give up the way of the cross for our attachments and cravings. Not to remain in our comfort zones, but to break the bonds of egoism, and to embrace Him. As Jesus had no place to lay His head, though the birds in the sky have nests, the jackal a den, we are invited to break the bonds of slavery to egoism, and become selfless. Being born in a cow shed belonged to someone else, being buried in a someone’s tomb, Jesus shows us the meaninglessness of our life. It is full of egoism and craving, we spend entering to the stage of this world, through the door of birth till we disappear from the door of the death.

Then what was Jesus’s response at the Transfiguration? It is descent from the mountain. He descended from that mountain to climb the mount of the cross. If the Lord didn’t come down from the mount Tabor, there wouldn’t have been a victorious resurrection prefigured by the Transfiguration. God never gives us a cross that cannot be carried out. He never gives us a defeat at the foot of the cross. Certainly, He will take us to the eternal salvation. Therefore, let’s follow Jesus not only on the mount Tabor but also on the top of the mount cross - Calvary.

Rev. Fr. Alec Roy Fernando
Diocese of Anuradhapura

Third Sunday of Lent

3rd March 2024

- **1st Reading:** **Exodus 20:1 – 17**
- **2nd Reading:** **1 Corinthians 1:22 – 25**
- **Gospel Reading:** **John 2:13 – 25**

Justice is to give God his due and to give neighbor his due. Giving God his due is what we call religion and worship. Giving my neighbor his due is to ensure his safety, freedom and life (cf. CCC 1807). Justice towards neighbor is to make sure that as I want to live a human life, he also has the same life in the society. It cannot be partiality based on religion, language or anything else.

Through the Decalogue (TEN COMMANDMENTS) as found in today's first reading God ensures this justice towards Him and the neighbor. The first three commandments consist of justice towards God. Since God has done everything to His chosen people, God demands that they accept only Him and no other and set apart everything that belongs to Him as His due.

The rest of the Ten Commandments consists of God's assurance of justice to one's neighbor. No one excluded. These commandments make sure that beginning from the parents, to one's neighbor including the foreigners, slaves and animals enjoy equal and proper treatment within the society. God chose people who had nothing, to give them everything. Therefore, as God treated them highly, each one must treat his neighbor highly with dignity.

Though we call these as commandments, they are God's gracious plan for the well being of man. They are God's intentions to help man live

joyfully within the society and world at large. That is why in today's responsorial Psalm we say 'You, Lord, have the message of eternal life.'

Through today's second reading we understand that Christianity does not depend merely on miracles and wisdom, but on justice. Unfortunately, even today as Christians we run after miracles and we think we are religious. We run after wonder-workers as holy people. As Christians we are engaged in great intellectual and logical talks and we think we are wise. This is not Christianity. Christianity depends on divine justice that we see in Jesus, the crucified one. One cannot understand this mystery without God's grace and faith. He died to make us live.

As Christians we are called upon to imitate or be another Christ, even sacrificing one's own life for the life of one's neighbor. Justice is to fight for my neighbor at the cost of even my life. This is the demand of Christianity. A holy person is not a wonder-worker or an excellent speaker or preacher, but the one who stands by his neighbor.

Even in today's Gospel John tells us how at the time of Jesus, even the place of worship had become a market-place. In a market it is not justice but profit that becomes important. Jesus wanted the place to be a place of worship, where justice is ensured to all. What is important is not the external structures but building up of one's attitude. Jesus refers to himself as the Temple. Paul says that each believer is a Temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:19 – 20; Eph 2:21 – 22). When we allow God to dwell in us and our attitudes to be based on God's ways, we become ones who ensure justice in the society.

History bears witness to the chaos created by selfishness. Our country in particular has experienced the consequences of those who wanted

the war to go on for almost three decades, those who allowed even through their own negligence the Easter Sunday Attack in 2019, the present economic crisis and all the insurrections that we have had from time to time in our beloved motherland. The ones who are not God-fearing have become blocks to a new constitution where each citizen is considered a son or a daughter of Mother Lanka. The pearl of the Indian Ocean has become a tear drop, crying with pain caused by these wounds created by few selfish minded ones among us. The cry for justice has fallen on deaf ears. Who is to be blamed? Where to begin? The change should start from each one of us the citizens of Sri Lanka.

In today's Gospel it is said that 'Jesus knew them all and did not trust himself to them; he never needed evidence about any man; he could tell what a man had in him.' Our hope is in God. While praying to God to change our attitudes, instead of merely expecting our leaders to bring about justice, let us at our own levels change our attitudes to consider each and everyone in our motherland as our own brothers and sisters. Let not the blood, the cry and the tears of the victims of injustice be forgotten. Justice to the victims will not bring them back to life, but it will ensure life to the living. Let us repent, follow God's ways during this grace filled season of Lent. Thus, let us begin to work towards the transformation of our society and world at large. Let us begin to give God His due and neighbor his due.

Rev. Fr. Alvin Peter Fernando
Diocese of Kandy



Fourth Sunday of Lent

10th March 2024

- **First Reading:** 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23
- **Second Reading:** Ephesians 2:4-10
- **Gospel:** John 3:14-21

“ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE HUMBLD AND LIFTED UP”

- Let us enter the meditation worshipping the Holy Cross

INTRODUCTION

- Having had 3 weeks of thorough preparation, let us initiate ourselves and enter the liturgy of the 4th week of lent.
- Let us pay attention to the rites and devotional rituals of the Catholic traditions during the Season of Lent (fasting, almsgiving and prayer)
- Being conscious of the prevailing real crisis of our motherland, let us strive for a real and national “passing over”
- Let us appropriate and personalize the deep meaning of the Lenten theme for the year, 2024: “Lent with the Oppressed - Seeking Justice.”

The invitation being extended in the readings today is to be humble in order to be lifted up participating in the paschal victory as the children of light caught by the love of Christ. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so will be the sinners in the Book of Numbers (21:4-19). They will be symbolically “lifted up” from the sin-stricken world to the deliverance of eternal life. “Lifting” in fact, is an act of bending low. One who is being ‘lifted up’ departs from what is earth-bound, just as everything that is high above is attracted to the earth below. According to Genesis 40, those lifted up are eliminated and the ‘lifting up’ in the New Testament resonates the life sacrifice on the cross.

Those who believe are promised the eternal life and therefore nothing can prevent and hinder the triumph of the cross. The disobedient and the rebellious world would continue as it used to be, even in the presence of God's love. The very incarnation of son of God, in parallel to Genesis 22 is a sacrificial offering of God's only begotten son. According to 1 Cor. 13, everything is subject to love and love patiently bears everything. In Christ, one finds the zenith and the noblest expression of unlimited love.

There is a judgment always waiting for us. It is a question of facing the world, a kind of 'separation' at which the children of light leaving behind the deeds of darkness. This separation and judgment would be a 'condemnation' and truth being the only way that would set us free.

PRACTICAL LIFE

Let us identify our own 'lifting' within a society characterized by lies and corruption. Let us commit ourselves in humility, to the services that God calls us to shoulder by his own 'lifting'. Let our thirst be not so much to receive love but to share it with others. Let us light up the lamps and march towards the paschal deliverance without cursing the deeds of darkness.

Rev. Fr. Dilan Fernando

Diocese of Chilaw



Fifth Sunday of Lent

17th March 2024

- **First Reading:** **Jeremiah 31:31-34**
- **Second Reading:** **Hebrew 5:7-9**
- **Gospel:** **John 12:20-33**

We are ready to take another step further in the whole experience of Exodus and passing over day by day and week by week, in the 40-day retreat that we began with the application of the ashes of the burnt palm crosses on our foreheads. The Lord is inviting us, giving a foretaste of his Passion well in advance, to have a distant glance at death and to swim against the current without being a victim of the flowing river or a drifting kelp of a ripple.

The one and only powerful tool that Jesus used against the types of Peter who dreamt of a crown despising the cross, against the types of James and John who, wanting to be seated at Jesus' left and right, dreamt not of the Kingdom belonging to God but to the word, against the types of Judas who were all focused on what could be found in coppers, against the types of Thomas who read and judged life through the lenses of doubt and suspicion and against those weak fishermen who will look and look, but will not really see, who will listen and listen, but will not understand, was the passion that he was to suffer, the impending death that he was to embrace and the life that was awaiting him after death. It was by means of his passion and death that Jesus could cleanse and make his disciples realistically earth-bound. The same Lord continues to invite us as that of his disciples to constantly ponder over and see for ourselves the cross of selflessness in the face of utter selfishness, the cross of humility in the face of plans of proud stubbornness, the cross of emptiness in the face of hoard and monetary accumulation and the cross of faith in the face of fear and doubt.

The Lord invited us to embrace and be a part of a thinking pattern which would go beyond the usual yardstick and criterion of the world:

it was Jesus who proclaimed and taught the whole world that the last will be first, and the first will be last, that by giving up, one receives, that life emerges and flows out of very death. He proved and bore witness to what he taught in his way of life inviting us to trace and recognize something deeper and profound behind what is evident and apparent: to recognize a huge tree hidden in a tiny mustard seed, to recognize a living saint hidden in a woman caught in adultery, to recognize a rock-like apostle hidden behind a simple fisherman like Simon Peter and to recognize Paul, a missionary par excellence, hidden behind Saul, the persecutor on the horseback. The Season of Lent invites us to see life through the eyes of Christ, it challenges you and me to measure and gauge life in terms of 'Christic yardstick' leaving aside and going beyond those patronized by the world.

Jesus is our exemplar and he alone is the reason as to why we should stop at the challenging Good News that he proclaims: unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed without germinating a new life. Jesus, having abandoned the heavens up above, came to dwell in the maternal womb here below, proclaiming to the world that unless a grain dies, it fails to bring forth life. He showed this by hanging on the cross for 3 hours and bringing to completion the very life that he began hanging on to the belly button for 9 months in the womb.

Therefore, it is not a secret that 'death' is the best teacher of 'life and living'. The Lent invites us to reflect and ponder over our lives looking at Jesus' death. Don't those Mannar- martyrs who gave their lives for the faith 475 years ago and those massacred and victimized in 30 years civil war and the Easter bomb attack 5 years ago, teach us the real meaning of 'life' lost in 'death'?

Rev. Fr. Prasad Harshana
Archdiocese of Colombo



Palm Sunday

24th March 2024

- **First Reading:** **Isiah 50: 4-7**
- **Second Reading:** **Philippians 2: 6-11**
- **Gospel :** **Mark 14: 1-15, 47**

REFLECTION:

As we begin the Holy Week, we have to remember that only you and I can make this week holy and benefit the maximum out of it. If we treat this week as any other ordinary week, without making some room in our schedules and agendas for reflection, prayer and change in our way of life, it will be holy in name only. This is a week of grace; thus embrace it and experience the true redemption deep within yourself. Let us also remember during the Holy Week the innumerable suffering of our own brethren in north and east and the atrocities committed against humanity during a three decade war and the victims of the Easter bomb attack five years ago for the gain of power and let us cry for justice for the forgotten.

Palm Sunday could be thought of as a day of contradiction. The Mass begins with the reading of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His joyous reception by the crowds who strewed palm branches before Him, crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest." Today, this inspiring scene is commemorated by processions of the faithful carrying palm branches into their churches. The contradiction, however, is experienced as the full narrative of the Passion of Christ is read, culminating with Jesus' death on the Cross.

Is it truly a contradiction? Is His glorious entrance into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week in any way opposed to His crucifixion? Certainly not. From a worldly perspective, for someone who lacks the ability to penetrate this mystery with the eyes of faith, the week ends in tragedy. But from the perspective of the salvific plan of the Father, the welcome Jesus receives as He enters Jerusalem is the welcome given

to the Savior of the World. His Cross would become the culmination of that act of salvation. For that reason, His entrance into that holy city was rightly celebrated with great joy, even though the people did not yet understand that the throne their new King would mount was the Cross.

As we enter into the Holy Week we are all invited to do so spiritually, meditatively, and interiorly. Our participation is not just the recalling of a historic event; our hearts must begin outside of Jerusalem's gate today, and we must courageously and joyfully accompany our Lord into that holy city. During that first Holy Week, the people's joy arose from their belief that Jesus would be an earthly ruler who would free them from Roman oppression.

Today, we are privileged to express our joyous acclamations as we spiritually accompany our Lord to the city of His crucifixion, because we know that Jesus' Kingship is so much more than an earthly triumph. His triumph is an eternal one that invites us to share in His Eternity. His triumph is a sacrificial one that invites us to share in His Sacrificial Love. His triumph is a glorious one that invites us to share in the Glory of His Resurrection.

Let us read through the Passion narrative again and again during this week, keeping the suffering of our people in mind. I must find myself in the characters of the passion narratives in different degrees; in Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Jesus' disciples, Peter, Judas, in Pilate, Soldiers, Chief Priests, in People, etc. How far can I change myself to own Jesus' redemption by doing so? We have one week more and better late than never. May the sacred liturgy of the Holy Week touch you, inspire you and transform you! Let truth & justice prevail because the blood of the innocent cry aloud to God!

Rev. Fr. B. Anton Sriyan
Diocese of Ratnapura



Good Friday

29th March 2024

- **First Reading:** **Isiah 52:13-53:12**
- **Second Reading:** **Hebrew 4:14-16, 5:7-9**
- **Gospel:** **John 18:1-19: 42**

From Death to Life

The lent calls us for the recollection and reflect on the death of our Lord Jesus Christ born to save humanity from the burden of sin. Jesus' birth marked with a crucified death was not a random phenomenon but the natural consequence of his option for the saving of the humanity through his liberative mission. Being conscious of the climax of his liberative mission, he wanted to tell his disciples "...you know in two days' time, it will be the Passover and the son of man will be handed over to be crucified." (Mt.26:1-2).

Then Chief Priests and the Jewish authorities gathered together at the Palace of the High Priest whose name was Caiaphas and agreed to trap Jesus and kill him, (Mt.26: 3-4). Jesus by his cruel death gave meaning to his life and his committed mission gave a meaning to his death recognising and obeying God's will. We too have to opt for a liberate mission as Jesus and commit ourselves to the mission. Thus, the climax of our mission will be our death accordingly. Consequently, we will be bestowed with the blessing of the Resurrection to a new everlasting life as Jesus.

Let this lent be a turning point in our Christian life as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. For this with contrite hearts, let us enter ourselves into a self-examination. For this examination, we may question ourselves.

- Have we not played the role of Judas by betraying our Christian values for our greediness and advantage?

- Have we not played the role of Peter, by false witnessing for the fear of intimidation?
- Have we not portrayed the role of Pilate by demonstrating innocence in spite of our misbehaviour?
- Have we not played the role of Herod the Great by abusing our power of authority to oppress others?

How oppressive in the devastating situation our people in Sri Lanka are made to suffer? The time has come for us, the people of God standing for the Kingdom values to raise our collective voice for justice and harmony vis a vis the stubbornness of the ruling authorities insensitive to the roaring cry for justice, continuing the perpetuation of injustice. Justice has not yet been met for the Easter victims even after 5 years of the tragedy. It has been the same for the agonies of the War Victims in the North and East in our motherland.

Let us together perform our baptismal prophetic role. As our Lord Jesus Christ defeated sin by compassion, let us defeat our personal and social sins. Through the praxis of compassion. Let this be our resolute Easter determination.

Rev. Fr. Charles Hewawasam
Diocese of Galle



Easter Sunday

31st March 2024

- **First Reading:** Acts 10:34, 37-43
- **Second Reading:** Colossians 3:1-4 OR 1 Corinthians 5:6-8
- **Gospel:** John 20:1-9

How much more challenging is it to uplift the despondent than to revive the dead?

In the Jesus's post resurrection narrative that sums up.

Today, we delve into the narration of St. Luke, chronicling the life of the Lord post-Christ's. This account serves as a comprehensive overview of the entire sequence of events, encompassing birth and resurrection. And what unfolded on the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus holds profound significance when viewed in its entirety.

Initially, we encounter a multitude whose expectations have crumbled. Even though their expectations have seemingly shattered, nearly everyone's hopes were surpassed in ways previously unimaginable. However, the disconnection lies in their inability to perceive this. It's not that their expectations were unmet, but rather that they didn't align with the anticipated framework. Despite the outcomes exceeding their expectations, a sense of extreme unhappiness pervaded the group, overshadowing any potential joy. They were disheartened, stuck in shock, and wearied by their circumstances, prompting a retreat to an outlying village.

Such a human experience mirrors the consequences of the fall, but what transpired in the divine realm when humans succumbed? Did God turn away from humanity in disappointment and abandon hope?

Rather, God, in His infinite grace, chose to descend to the very place where humanity had fallen. In doing so, He bore the weight of disappointment, much like the hope He had bestowed upon mankind being trampled. Yet, this wasn't the end; the Son who had been crucified was resurrected, and others who had fallen with Him were likewise raised.

Despite the arrangements made for their resurrection, do these fallen ones linger in a state of unwillingness to rise? Is it conceivable to remain indifferent to their plight? Those who have risen should be the guiding light, encouraging others to follow suit.

However, if we persist in our refusal to rise, can God truly lift us up?

The journey to Emmaus unfolds as a reflection of our entire salvation narrative, emphasizing the divine predicament.

Human apathy and disillusionment pose the most formidable obstacles to redemption. How many among us today are mired in boredom, trapped in rigid mindsets, and living stagnant lives? The inability to break free from such situations may stem from a lack of patience and lack of faith.

Despite our insatiable appetites, we must acknowledge that we alone cannot illuminate the path. Our sole hope lies in God, who can infuse life with positivity. Doesn't the reunion of those who sought refuge in Emmaus set a guiding example for us? Does their reunion not beckon us too to seek the guiding flame of shared humanity in the shadows of our own struggles?

Rev. Fr. Sagara Prishantha Perera
Diocese of Kurunegala



**You are the potter I am the clay
Mould me and make me after your will**

On 21st April 2019, Easter became a devastating day that crushed my entire life. It marked the tragic loss of my dear husband and children, making it the most agonizing experience of my life.

“Jesus, what have you done and why did you compel it to happen?” The echoes of my screams still vibrate in my memory. Since then, my life has been full of challenges. I’ve gone through numerous trials and tribulations experiencing waves of emotions like mistrust, hatred, and ridicule.

In the midst of my spiritual discord with the Divine, I found comfort in praying with the holy rosary. The reason why God put me in this tough situation, leaving me all alone, is still a mystery that I don’t understand.

Many people prayed earnestly for victims like me. I sensed the strong prayers from clergy, nuns, and loved ones surrounding me. I challenged and strengthened my faith. Despite the deep sadness with the support and guidance of my spiritual father.

I felt a growing light within my heart, dispelling the darkness through Jesus. I have faith that my husband and children are living happily in the light of the Lord Jesus. I find contentment knowing they have become messengers of Jesus’ profound mission of death and resurrection.

I reflect on the difficult struggles of Mother Mary. I ask for the prayers of our Holy Mother to guide me towards comfort. Despite facing obstacles and challenges, I feel the never-ending love of Jesus. His joy and happiness fill my heart, inspiring me to fulfill my duties on earth, even when I encounter the storms of evil.

-An Easter Victim

Transcendent Experience during the Final Battle of War

In the final days of the Calvary conflict, I can't shake off the memories of the sorrowful events. The scars of war are still vivid, especially the families who lost their homes and loved ones.

The Rosary, held in hand and worn around the neck, is like a shining light from the Holy Bible during dark and difficult times. It serves as the two guiding eyes of our faith. In the war-torn land, there were no essential facilities, no medicine for wounds, no shelters for survival, and no places to bury the deceased. In the face of life-or-death situations, all that remained were prayers and faith.

Even though government officials and humanitarian organizations left us, the constant companionship of Christ's resurrection and God's eternal love stayed with us, providing steadfast courage.

Our spiritual leaders like Priests and nuns protected us from the wolves. We found true Christ in them. We found Mother Mary with their guidance. Their presence strengthened us. They bore our burdens like Moses, like the good Lord Jesus, who was weak in suffering while constantly listening to us. This is our experience of war towards the victory of Easter.

-A War Victim from North

Alleluia



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